

Part of Lake Tahoe's Protection is a Sustainable "Allocation" System

By Joanne S. Marchetta

With spring and a new building season having arrived, many are imagining their Tahoe dream home again, so questions about the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's method of annual development allocation deserve some attention. As you will see, with Lake Tahoe nearing what is called "full buildout," this year's residential allocation distribution is the beginning of a new way forward for the finite amount of vacant land remaining at Lake Tahoe.

More than 40 years ago, TRPA was called on to put the brakes on the rampant over-development and residential subdivisions that were threatening Lake Tahoe's pristine environment. One way TRPA achieved that was to slow the rate and pace of new home building at Lake Tahoe so that environmental improvement and restoration projects could keep pace with growth. With limits on new subdivisions came a cap on the number of developable parcels region-wide and an allocation system was started. An allocation is basically the right to build or create a new "unit of use" which could be a home or an apartment. TRPA created different types of allocations, such as for tourist accommodations and commercial space, as well.

Today, the remaining vacant land at Lake Tahoe is nearing the point when there will be no more vacant parcels to build on, what we call full buildout. Out of the total 43,000 private parcels that exist today, only around 4,000 are still vacant. This means that, depending on the rate of allocation, Lake Tahoe could see an end of new development on vacant land within the next two decades.

Having a limited number of new residential building allocations means there is less pressure on the Lake and there is more time for environmental restoration projects to respond to the impacts of development. It also means new home construction can continue for a longer period of time before all the vacant parcels disappear. Ultimately, this all leads to a healthier environment and a clearer Lake because what happens on the land at Lake Tahoe affects the water.

The building allocation system opens more opportunities to remodeling and redevelopment. Improvements to existing structures are needed to add environmental upgrades to more than 25,000 properties throughout the region. That is the number of properties that have not completed stormwater Best Management Practices (BMPs), which are required to stop fine sediment and other pollutants from entering the lake. Permits to remodel or rebuild are only issued if BMPs and other environmental

upgrades are included in the project. So, a more robust redevelopment market means improved water quality as well as extended job security for many in the construction trades.

With these facts in mind, the updated Lake Tahoe Regional Plan last year reduced the rate of annual residential allocation by 55 percent—to a maximum of 130 per year versus the historic maximum of 300. With private land at Lake Tahoe at 90 percent buildout today, the 2012 Regional Plan changed the maximum allocation rate to reflect changing dynamics on land and the continued need for environmental improvements throughout the region. For the 4,000 remaining vacant lots, the Regional Plan authorized 2,600 new residential allocations to be distributed over the next 20 years and 600 residential bonus units to be available only for environmental redevelopment projects in town centers. The 2,600 allocations will be distributed to local governments at the maximum rate of 130 per year, but some years it may be less. A faster rate of allocation would not bring the desired environmental benefits and would force the region to reach buildout more quickly—bringing an earlier end of this as a way to seed the economy and construction trades.

This method of residential allocation answers the spirit of the Tahoe Bi-State Compact that calls for TRPA to create an orderly system for growth while protecting and improving the environment. Certain environmental improvements happen in-step with a limited amount of new growth, and a healthy market exists for environmental improvements to existing buildings. This method is also considered a cutting-edge sustainability measure and it along with other TRPA programs are studied by land use professionals around the nation and the world for resource protection. Keeping Tahoe at the forefront of global resource protection is a status that befits the Jewel of the Sierra.

Joanne S. Marchetta is Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA).

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